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Comment

The tinkers in our midst

ON ACCOUNT of my surname, you'd expect me to take a partisan view of the Battle of Basildon between travellers and settled residents, wouldn't you? What? You didn't realise that the McDonaghs are perhaps *the* premier tribe in the traveller community? You do now. The Irish ambassador, one Bobby McDonagh, always jokes that he'll propose me for membership of the Travellers' Club.

But even I would hesitate to suggest, as Vanessa Redgrave has done, that their situation brings to mind the plight of gypsies annihilated by the Nazis. "I have always supported the travellers ... since I became conscious of what happened during Hitler's rule," she says.

Mrs Redgrave has something of a Grand Old Lady stature on the Left, accentuated by a succession of family bereavements, but she's on the wrong track here. I think it's the ambiguity of the word "gypsy". It covers two very different groups. One is the European gypsies, who tell fortunes, are brilliant musicians and suffered in the Holocaust. The other is our lot, the Irish ones, who are distinguished by a tendency to red hair, freckles and a habit of christening their male children Jimmy. I fear the only way to identify the difference is to resurrect that non-PC term, "tinkers".

Wedlock, the modern way



Beckham with a top-of-the-range Birkin bag

leaving recession